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ABSTRACT

The relationship of reading material to delinquent behavior has been a much discussed subject. This author has taken some steps toward identifying and understanding the emotional concomitants of reading. He investigated the perceptions of emotional concomitants which exist among a sizable and geographically diversified group of subjects presumed to be sensitive to phenomena of human development and learning, and/or verbal behavior. The subjects were 414 men and women enrolled in 11 colleges and universities in nine states. A constructed checklist asked each subject to indicate as "never," "rarely," "sometimes," or "often" his perception of the commonness of cccurrence of certain emotional responses during reading. The checklist was divided into four sections: subjective experiences of emotion, involuntary physiological responses, overt action, and incentive reduction. It was concluded that the subjects did perceive a variety of emotional responses occurring in relation to their reading and that their perceptions differed according to sex, age, and major field of study. It was suggested that the checklist be further refined. Tables and references are included. (NH)

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF EMOTIONAL RESPONSES RELATED TO READING*

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Various forms of reading material have been implicated in heinous crimes, delinquent behavior, and distorted psychological development (1,2). They have been equally claimed to be innocuous (for example, a comic book publisher defended his industry, as reported in Machinists' Monthly Journal, January, 1955, on grounds that no one "was ever harmed by anything they read . . . . Neuroses are caused by real emotional experiences.") Reading materials have been considered by some a far inferior substitute for reality (3). And an opposite pole of opinion is that ostensibly objectionable reading materials may safeguard society by providing a safety-valve outlet for the potentially harmful impulses of some individuals (4); or that various reading materials may be therapeutic either incidentally or as used systematically in bibliotherapy (5).

While decisions of far-reaching consequence--for censorship or for free publication, for highly structured reading guidance of young people or for liberal exposure of them to all sorts of publications--continue to be made on dogmatic bases, the state of knowledge of the emotional concomitants of reading continues largely as McKeon and others described it:

> There is little methodical and objective knowledge of the psychological effects upon those variously exposed to the six major media of mass communication . . . .Among all these . . . , it appears that least is known about the effects of book reading . . . . Intensive studies of the psychological effects of books upon their readers are almost entirely absent . . . . (6).

It has been my purpose in the study reported here to make some tentative first steps toward identifying and understanding the emotional concomitants of

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reading. Specifically, I have investigated the perceptions of such emotional concomitants existing among a sizable and geographically diversified group of subjects who are presumed to be sensitive to phenomena of human development and learning, and/or verbal behavior. I have set the following null hypotheses as reasonable correlates of any assumption that "real" emotional responses do not occur or are of no consequence in relation to reading:

Hypothesis 1: The group of subjects should perceive emotional responses occurring in concomitance with reading to no more than a negligible extent.

Hypothesis 2: It should be impossible to identify in the perceptions of emotional responses occurring in concomitance with reading as reported by the subjects, general differences relating to age, sex, or major field of professional study.

Hypothesis 3: It should be impossible to identify in the perceptions of emotional responses occurring in concomitance with reading as reported by the subjects, specific differences in extent or quality of emotional response as perceived, relating to age, sex, or major field of professional study.

RELATED LITERATURE

Loth cites research-based generalizations of Jahoda to the effect that reading about sexual matters or violence has not been shown to lead to delinquent acts (7); and a 1929 study by Davis which included some information about the incidence of reading as an erotic stimulus among female subjects (8). Loth's major point is that basic information about the psycho-emotional effects of reading is lacking (9). Kinsey et al report that fantasy, including that induced or channeled by literature, figures to some degree in the sexual behavior of human males, particularly those of higher educational levels and highly-developed imaginative capacities (10); these researchers also cite the unavoidable involvement of the sex-behavior researcher with a wide range of literary forms of expression (11). Masters and Johnson verify the efficacy of fantasy and literary media as sexual stimuli (12). Gebhard et al, while reporting some differences among types of sex offenders and non-offenders in sensitivity to psychic stimuli, including printed materials, tend to attribute these differences to characteristics associated with level of education: imaginativeness, ability to project, and sensitivity; and to youthfulness. They

recognize, without giving much credence to, an alternative explanation: that sex offenders are a group generally non-sensitive to psychic stimuli and thus driven to overt antisocial outlets (13). In my own doctoral study, I found little suggestion of any emotional or problem-behavior patterns associated with differing amounts or differing types of comic-book reading among seventh-grade children (14).

THE PRESENT STUDY: POPULATION AND METHOD

The subjects of the present study were 414 men and women enrolled in 11 colleges and universities, in 9 states, in the summer or fall session, 1969. (Tables I and II show the composition of the study population as to sex, age groups, and major fields of study.) A checklist was developed, asking each subject to indicate "Never," "Rarely," "Sometimes," or "Often," as his perception of the commonness of occurrence of certain emotional responses during the act of reading (or, in the case of overt actions, in a series of responses originating during the act of reading). The four divisions of the checklist, and a few examples of responses listed in each, are as follows:

Subjective Experiences of Emotion (e.g., anger, fear, shame, delight, sexual excitement).

Involuntary Physiological Responses (e.g., laughing, weeping, acceleration of heart beat; also specifically identified male and female sex-arousal responses).

Overt Actions (e.g., beating up on someone, violently throwing book or magazine, sexual intercourse, masturbation).

Incentive Reductions (e.g., curiosity satisfied, fear dispelled, dejection or gloom dispelled, sexual excitement dispelled).

TABLE I

THE POPULATION OF THE STUDY
BY AGE GROUPS

Age Group	Male	Female	Sex Unident.	Total
15 - 18	4	3	0	7
19 - 24	46	150	3	199
25 - 34	42	73	4	119
35 - 44	17	27	4	48
45 - 54	6	27	1	34
55+	2	5	0	7
Age Unident. (The 15 - 18 and 55+ groups are treated as "No Response" in age-group computations)				
TOTAL	117	285	12	414

TABLE II

THE POPULATION OF THE STUDY
BY MAJOR FIELDS

Major Field	Males	Females	Sex Unident.	Total
Biology	29	20	3	52
Elementary Ed.	18	140	5	163
Ed. Administration	5	8	1	14
Guidance-Counseling	13	8	0	21
English	10	40	2	52
Psychology	8	6	0	14
"Other"	34	61	1	96
Major Field Not Ident.	0	2	0	2
TOTAL	117	285	12	414

After several trials of the checklist in Drake University classes, followed by critical reaction and indicated revisions, it was sent to instructors in the 11 colleges and universities, administered to subjects then enrolled in their classes, and returned for analysis.

RESULTS

For purposes of testing the three hypotheses in some detail, in addition to the four divisions of the checklist cited above, groups of items were "lifted" from any or several of the divisions to form the following categories: Excitation of Anger, Fear-Anxiety, Depression, Sexual Response, and Pleasure-Enjoyment; and Diminution or Relief of Anger, Fear-Anxiety, Depression, and Sexual Emotion.

A statistic amenable to comparison among the groups of subjects was obtained by computing the per cent of maximum possible response score represented by the actual response score of a given group for a given checklist division or category, using a numerical scale of Never: 1, Rarely: 2, Sometimes: 3, and Often: 4. This statistic for the total group of subjects for the four divisions of the checklist ranged from 55.98% to 67.27%. While these percentages have no defined, absolute quantitative value, they seem reasonably to indicate a more than "negligible" perception of emotional concomitants of reading, as defined by the checklist, among the participating subjects. The rejection of Hypothesis 1 is strongly supported.

To test Hypothesis 2, Chi Squares were computed for the four-way distributions of responses as between total males and total females, among age groups, and among academic-major groups. Table III shows the incidence of high to moderate significance-levels for differences in the response distributions of these groups. For a majority of the aspects tested, Hypothesis 2 is confidently rejected.

To adequately test Hypothesis 3, apparent quantitative differences among various groups' percent-of-maximum-possible scores will have to be further tested statistically.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

It is concluded that the participating subjects do perceive a variety of emotional responses occurring in relation to reading, and that their perceptions differ according to sex, age, and major field of study.

No positive statements can be made on the basis of this study about the actual occurrence (as distinguished from the perception) of these emotional responses. Among the hypotheses which now suggest themselves for subsequent studies are these: (1) The respondents' personal, subjective experiences of emotional responses to reading are positively related to the perceptions reported via the checklist instrument used in this study. (The items of the checklist are particular responses, for the most part not colored by value-judgment; the respondent could not fall back on dogmatic assumptions about the relationship of literature of violence to acts of murder, for example, and might be expected to rely on personal experience, direct observation, and first-hand reports.) (2) The English major, as a person of particular verbal and imaginative aptitudes, achieves more of his emotional experiences through the mediation of, or in relation to, literature than do majors in other fields, with different aptitudes and predilections. (Inspection of the data suggests that the tendency of the English majors to indicate more "Sometimes" and "Often" responses than the other groups is an important if not primary contributor to the significance of differences among majors.)

Finally, the data of this study provide a basis for refinement of the checklist as an instrument for acquiring further information about emotional responses to reading as perceived or experienced. A body of such information would seem to be prerequisite to establishing sound bases for certain crucial uses and possible critical controls of reading.

TABLE III

SIGNIFICANCE LEVELS OF CHI SQUARES

CHECKLIST DIVISION OR CATEGORY	Groupings of Participating Subjects		
	Sex	Age Groups	Majors
Subjective Experience	.001	.001	.001
Involuntary Physiological Response	.001	.001	.001
Overt Action	.001	.001	.001
Incentive Reduction	.001	.001	.001
Excitation of Anger	.02	Not sig.	Not sig.
Fear-Anxiety	.01	.05	.01
Depression	.001	.001	.001
Sexual Response	.001	.05	.001
Pleasure-Enjoyment	.001	.01	*
Diminution or Relief of Anger	.05	Not sig.	Not sig.
Fear-Anxiety	.001	Not sig.	*
Depression	.01	.001	.001
Sexual Emotion	Not sig.	Not sig.	*

*Computations presently available are invalid because of insufficient responses tallied in one or more cells.

FOOTNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Johnson
2. Wertham
3. Marcus, p. 10
4. Ullerstam, cited by Scheuch, p. 52.
5. Thomas
6. McKeon et al, p. 71
7. Loth, p. 212
8. Ibid., pp. 209-10
9. Ibid., pp. 209 ff.
10. Kinsey et al, pp. 210, 345, 363, 510, 521
11. Ibid., pp. 22-3
12. Masters and Johnson
13. Gebhard et al, Ch. 17
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